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RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY 0103
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000102

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA
LONDON FOR MILLER, PARIS FOR NOBLES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/03/2020
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: GRAND MUFTI'S COMMENTS ON PROPHET SPARKS RARE
PUBLIC ATTACKS

REF: 09 DAMASCUS 00806

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Reporting on a January 19 meeting between Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun and a George Mason University delegation, London-based daily Al-Quds al-Arabi attributed remarks to the Mufti that sparked outrage in certain conservative Islamic circles. As a result, a public campaign against the Mufti, led by conservative cleric Sheikh Said al-Bouti, squared off against a clutch of secular writers and liberal clerics who support the Mufti. International anti-regime elements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, have also waded in to the fracas. The SARG, while tolerant of the debate in general, has punished imams who have attacked the Mufti in their Friday sermons. End Summary.

Who Said What

12. (C) On January 19 Syria's Grand Mufti, Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun, met with a group of graduate students led by Professor and Rabbi Marc Gopin, Director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution (CRDC) at George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. Gopin has been working in Syria on and off since 12003. His primary on-the-ground facilitator is Hind Qabawat, who has close ties to the government but is active in both conflict resolution and interfaith dialogue. Qabawat and Gopin have conveyed to us that they view the Mufti as a moderating influence in the country, and as someone with the political leverage to bring various religious leaders and civil society activists together in dialogue. Gopin told us he hoped to use the CRDC's connection with the Mufti to promote citizen diplomacy and interfaith dialogue, both of which he viewed as a crucial components in the regional peace process.

13. (C) Following the Mufti's session with Gopin and the students, Kamel Sakr -- a Damascus-based writer with Al-Quds al-Arabi who was not present during the meeting -- ran an article that quoted the Mufti as saying, "If the Prophet Muhammad asked me to disbelieve in Christianity and Judaism, I would disbelieve in him, and if he ordered me to kill people, I would tell him that he was not a prophet."

Apology Demanded

14. (C) The published quote set off a firestorm of indignation accompanied by calls -- published on the Internet and by international press agencies -- for the Mufti to apologize. Gopin and Qabawat expressed surprise over the reaction from other clerics. Homs Archbishop Isidore Battikha told us in a separate meeting that Damascene Sunnis did not like the Mufti because he hailed from Aleppo. Battikha had not heard of the controversy until we raised it with him, but he suspected this antipathy might have contributed to the flap.

15. (U) A group of conservative clerics reportedly headed by Sheikh Said al-Bouti (ref A) led the charge in Syria, and were soon joined by other international groups. Muslim Brotherhood spokesperson Zuheir Salem issued an official statement to LevantNews.com asking the Mufti to admit his mistake and apologize. On January 27, Abu Basir al-Tartusi, a Syrian Salafi cleric living in London, posted a threatening criticism of the Mufti, accusing him of being a "heretic" and "henchman" of a repressive regime: "You, Hassoun, are the mufti of tyrants. You are the mufti of the sectarian Ba'athist regime that is suppressing the Syrian people with iron and fire . . . I would like to say to you: be prepared for your doom. Nobody has dared to slander or insult the Prophet without facing grave punishment in the religion and the hereafter."

16. (U) Defending himself in a January 22 Friday sermon in Aleppo, the Mufti denied having made such remarks, claiming he had simply informed the students that the Prophet commanded Muslims to respect all religions and not to kill

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people. He reportedly told his congregation that he reminded the students that "before you were Americans and before I was Syrian, we had been brothers in God."

The Defense

17. (C) Liberal clerics and secular civil society activists quickly banded together to defend the Mufti. Asma Kuftaro (daughter of former Islamic Institute director Mahmud Kuftaro and granddaughter of the former Grand Mufti, Ahmad Kuftaro), the Muslim cleric Muhammad Walid Falyoun, civil society activists Hind Qabawat and Yahya al-Ous (protect all), among others, published web-articles at Thara.com explaining how the Mufti's remarks in no way contradicted the Qur'an. They praised the Mufti's tolerance and ability to break down barriers between religions.

18. (SBU) While the SARG has remained on the sidelines of the dispute, it has taken punished an imam for statements made against the Mufti that were deemed too derogatory. Sheikh al-Yaaqoubi, Imam of al-Hasan Mosque in Damascus, attacked the Mufti during a January 22 Friday sermon. The Ministry of Religious Endowments immediately stepped into the fray and dismissed Yaaqoubi from his position.

19. (C) Comment: How the Mufti's comments were leaked to the press is unclear. An apology from the Grand Mufti, nevertheless, is unlikely. The Mufti is the source from which Sunni religious authority flows in Syria. Capitulation to his detractors could irreparably compromise his power and would certainly tarnish his image. The Ministry's swift action against the Friday imam reflected the strength of the ministry's relationship with the Mufti. Public calls for an apology will probably remain permissible, but ad hominem attacks, we assess, will be viewed as an assault on regime legitimacy and punished as such. An ironic outcome of the scuffle is an alignment between anti-Ba'athist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Tartusi with more regime-friendly clerics like al-Bouti. Equally strained is the shared protective mission of civil society activists and the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Such odd bedfellows

demonstrate, at least for the moment, how religious issues can cut across normally divisive political positions. Should the chorus of expatriate, anti-regime Muslims grow louder, we expect the SARG will be forced to tamp down public outcry in Syria for the sake of appearances. End comment.
HUNTER